

Unfortunately, Attention Spans Are Getting Shorter

Human beings today now have a shorter attention span than a goldfish.

That's what [a study conducted by Microsoft last year](#) found. A goldfish loses focus after nine seconds. In our age of smartphones, however, the average person today can only focus for eight seconds.

That's a dramatic change from 2000, when the average human attention span was 12 seconds.

It wasn't always this way. For instance, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman has pointed out the remarkable attention spans demonstrated by the attendees of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates in Illinois in 1858.

It's important to note, these debates were not on fashion or pop culture, but public policy. The form of the debates was not emotional, off-the-cuff remarks, but prepared texts that were read. And the attendees were not primarily scholars or government officials, but average Americans:

"The first of the seven famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas took place on August 21, 1858, in Ottawa, Illinois. Their arrangement provided that Douglas would speak first, for one hour; Lincoln would take an hour and a half to reply; Douglas, a half hour to rebut Lincoln's reply. This debate was considerably shorter than those to which the two men were accustomed. In fact, they had tangled several times before, and all of their encounters had been much lengthier and more exhausting. For example, on October 16, 1854, in Peoria, Illinois, Douglas delivered a three-hour

address to which Lincoln, by agreement, was to respond. When Lincoln's turn came, he reminded the audience that it was already 5 p.m., that he would probably require as much time as Douglas and that Douglas was still scheduled for a rebuttal. He proposed, therefore, that the audience go home, have dinner, and return refreshed for four more hours of talk. The audience amiably agreed, and matters proceeded as Lincoln had outlined.

[...]

[The audience's] attention span would obviously have been extraordinary by current standards. Is there any audience of Americans today who could endure seven hours of talk? or five? or three? Especially without pictures of any kind?"

The Lincoln-Douglas debates are but one example of the impressive literary culture that pervaded America in past centuries—a culture that valued things that required more than eight seconds of one's attention.